

# Kunapipi

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## Poems

Nicolas Guillen

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## Poems

### Abstract

WHAT COLOUR?, I HAVE and SONG OF RETURN

# Nicolás Guillén

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## WHAT COLOUR?

‘His skin was black, but with the purest  
soul, white as the snow...’

Yevtushenko\* (in a cable) on the assassination  
of Martin Luther King.

What a white soul, they say,  
that noble pastor had.  
His skin so black, they say,  
his skin so black in colour,  
was on the inside snow,  
a white lily,  
fresh milk,  
cotton-wool.  
What purity.  
There wasn’t one stain  
on his very white interior.

(In short, what an extraordinary find:  
‘The Black whose soul was white’,  
that melodramatic tale.)  
But it could be said in another way:  
What an excellent black soul  
the very gentle pastor had.  
What a superior black passion  
burned in his open heart.  
What pure black thoughts  
his fertile brain nourished.  
What black love  
So shared  
With everybody.

And why not,  
why could he not have a black soul  
that heroic pastor?

Black as coal.

\*Yevgenii Yevtushenko (b. 1933): modern Russian poet.

## I HAVE

When I see myself and touch myself  
I, John, a Nobody only yesterday,  
and today John with everything,  
and today with everything.  
I glance around, I look,  
I see myself and touch myself  
and I ask myself how has it been possible.

I have, let's see,  
I have the pleasure of walking through my country,  
owner of all there is in it,  
looking very closely at what  
I didn't have, nor could have before.  
I can say cane,  
I can say mountain,  
I can say city,  
I can say army,  
now mine forever and yours, ours,  
and a vast splendour  
of sunbeam, star, flower.

I have, let's see,  
I have the pleasure of going,  
I, a peasant, a worker, a simple man,  
I have the pleasure of going  
(just an example)

to a bank and speaking with the manager,  
not in English,  
not as 'Sir',  
but calling him 'compañero' as we say in Spanish.

I have, let's see,  
that being black  
no one can stop me,  
at the door of a dancing hall or a bar.  
Or even in a hotel lobby  
yelling at me there are no rooms  
not a small room not a large one  
or a tiny room where I might rest.

I have, let's see,  
there are no rural police  
to seize me and lock me in a precinct jail  
or uproot me from my land  
and cast me in the middle of the highways.

I have the land and I have the sea,  
no country-club, no high life,  
no tennis and no yacht  
but from beach to beach and wave on wave,  
gigantic, blue, open, democratic:  
in short the sea.

I have, let's see,  
I've learned to read  
to count,  
I have that I've learned to write,  
and to think  
and to laugh.  
I have, now,  
a place to work  
and earn  
what I have to eat.  
I have, let's see,  
I have, what I had to have.

## SONG OF RETURN

Do you know  
the land of the rice and bamboo?  
Don't you know it?  
Now, I've come from Peking  
Peking,  
without mandarin  
nor palanquin.  
Also I have been in Shanghai:  
there is not even one Yankee in Shanghai.  
Over there  
life is blossoming.  
You can see  
how life is burgeoning.

Sing with me, friend  
and say as I say!  
There is not  
not even one Yankee in Shanghai.  
Peking,  
the coffin of the mandarin.  
Run to see,  
the land of the rice and bamboo!

Translated by Salvador Ortiz-Carboneres.